Lesson Three
James and John: We Are First

Focal Text
Mark 1:19-20; 3:13-17; 10:35-45

Background

Main Idea
Even though James and John had left much behind to follow Jesus, they continued to need Jesus' correction and instruction about serving him and others.

Quick Read
To serve Jesus, we must serve others as he has served us.

Commentary
In John 13 we find Jesus the night before his death, doing something that was unprecedented in his culture. John records that our Lord “got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (John 13:4-5).

No Jew, not even a Jewish slave, could be made to do this. Imagine the Son of God stooped before the men who would forsake him, deny him, and betray him. Picture him taking their dirty, smelly feet in his sinless hands and gently washing them. Watch him
dry them with the slave’s towel wrapped around his waist. Hear him explain the reason for his shocking act:

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:14-17).

It’s been said that when we stand before Christ in judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10), he will not ask us about our title, but our towel. He measures our success by our service. So should we.

**Leave everything for Jesus (1:19-20)**
In lesson two we watched Jesus call Peter and Andrew into his apostolic band as “fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). In this lesson we’ll watch him call their business partners, James and John.

Our text begins: “When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets” (Mark 1:19). Walking along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, he had “gone a little farther” (probaino, meaning to advance, move on). There he saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee, “preparing” (katartizontas, meaning restoring, repairing, making adequate) their nets after a night of fishing.

As with Peter and John, “without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him” (1:20). “Without delay” (euthys, or immediately, straightway) he “called” (ekalesen, or summoned, invited) them, and they “left” (aphentes, or departed, divorced) their father and “followed” (apelthon, or went after) him. As with Peter and Andrew, they decided immediately to leave their vocations to follow the One who would now be their Lord.

**Meet James**
James the son of Zebedee is not to be confused with James the half-brother of Jesus. The latter was leader of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 15:13) and author of the epistle bearing his name. The former—the James in Mark 1:19—speaks not a recorded word in Scripture, but his life and witness were eternally significant.

James and his brother were probably related to Jesus by birth. The evidence for this assertion is linked to three lists of the women present at Jesus’ crucifixion:
Mark 1:19-20; 3:13-17; 10:35-45. James and John: We Are First

- Mark: “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Younger and of Joses, and Salome” (Mark 15:40).
- John: Jesus’ “mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (John 19:25).
- Matthew: “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons” (Matthew 27:56).

Scholars identify Mary the mother of James and Joses with Mary the wife of Clopas. And so the remaining person is Salome, who must be the sister of Jesus’ mother and the mother of Zebedee’s sons. If this is so, James and John were Jesus’ cousins.

James was the first of Jesus’ disciples to be martyred (Acts 12:2). He is named among the first three disciples in every list; in Mark 3:17 he follows only Peter. Perhaps he was the older brother and thus preceded John. In any case, he was in the inner circle of Jesus’ closest friends on earth. And yet he never appears separate from his brother in the Gospels.

James’s one individual appearance in Scripture is his martyrdom: “About this time King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also” (Acts 12:1-3). From this verse we learn four important facts about James:

- He was so important to the early Christian movement that Herod selected him for execution even before Peter.
- He was such a threat to Herod that the despot wanted him gone, and such a problem for the Jewish leaders that his death “pleased” them.
- He was not crucified by Herod, even though he was a Galilean and almost certainly not a Roman citizen. There is no certain way to explain Herod’s decision, given that crucifixion would have made James’s death an even more public warning to the church and appeasement to the religious authorities. It seems most likely to me that he feared public backlash if he executed James publicly.
- He and the other apostles remaining in Jerusalem were men of remarkable courage. Herod’s action could not have surprised them, given the treatment Rome had given their Lord. It would have been far safer for him to retreat to Galilee, return to his fishing business, and stay away from the authorities.

Early tradition has much to say about James’s life and death. For instance, Eusebius found a story in the lost Hypotyposes of Clement of Alexandria, chapter 7:
He says that the man who led him to the judgment seat, seeing him bearing his testimony to the faith, and moved by the fact, confessed himself a Christian. Both therefore, says he, were led away to die. On their way, he entreated James to be forgiven of him, and James considering a little, replied, “Peace be to thee,” and kissed him; and then both were beheaded at the same time” (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 1.9).

James is considered the patron saint of Spain. It is claimed that he went there and preached Christ to that country, before returning to Jerusalem and his martyrdom. His remains were then taken to Spain, where miracles were reportedly performed in their presence.

Meet John

John is by far the better-known brother. Before following Jesus, he had been a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:35-40).

John and his family were known to the high priest and his court. He went with Peter to the courtyard of the High Priest’s house after Jesus’ arrest:

Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in (John 18:15-16).

There is a Franciscan tradition that Zebedee maintained a branch office in Jerusalem and a house in the city. Stones and arches of that house are still standing and were used by an early Christian church. Tradition says that Zebedee’s business supplied fish to the family of the High Priest, another indication of its prosperity (see Mark 1:20).

Most scholars identify John with the unnamed “beloved disciple” of the Fourth Gospel. Here’s what we know about this person. At the Last Supper, he reclined against Jesus’ breast, so that he was seated at the Lord’s right hand (John 13:21-25). This was a position of the greatest honor, usually reserved for the host’s closest friend.

Jesus entrusted the care of his mother to the Beloved Disciple:

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home (John 19:25-27).
The Beloved Disciple arrived first at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning (John 20:1-9). And he was present at the lakeside when the risen Christ appeared to his followers (John 21).

Tradition indicates that John later serves as pastor in Ephesus, where he cared for Mary until she died. Perhaps in response to his growing stature, he was banished to the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9, about AD 95): “the apostle and evangelist John, who was yet living, in consequence of his testimony to the divine word, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos” (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.18; see Irenaeus, Against Heresies 5.30.3; Jerome, On Illustrious Men 9). After Patmos he returned to Ephesus, where he ministered until his death. His grave stands there today; we visit it every time I bring study groups to Ephesus.

While James never speaks a recorded word in Scripture, he was such a threat to Herod that the despot made him the first apostolic martyr. His brother, John, went on to write a Gospel, three letters, and the Revelation. Their lives are clear indication of the transformation Christ can effect in any person willing to follow him fully.

Now Jesus comes to us and calls us to do the same.

**Serve in Jesus’ authority (3:13-17)**

One of the most tempting heresies of our day is that we can do God’s work in our ability. Our culture thinks we can do anything if we get up earlier, stay up later, work longer, and try harder. But such self-dependent ministry is folly. Human words cannot change human hearts. No matter how hard we study and how diligently we prepare, you and I cannot convict a single person of a single sin or save a single soul. Only the eternal Spirit can do eternal work.

It is therefore vital that we follow Jesus’ call in submission to his authority. Our text continues: “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him” (Mark 3:13). He called those he “wanted” (ethelen, or willed, desired, purposed). Prior to this text, Mark gave us a brief summary of Jesus’ healing ministry. Jesus’ ministry made him so popular that he could not travel freely, requiring him to retreat “up on a mountainside” so he could be alone with his followers.

Out of this larger group “he appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that they might send them out to preach” (3:14). He “appointed” (epoiesen, or caused, assigned) twelve, designating them “apostles” (apostolous, or delegates, envoys) that he might “send them out” (apostelle, or send a message) to “preach” (keryssein, or announce, proclaim, make known).
In addition to preaching, the apostles were “to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:15). Jesus gave them “authority” (exousian, or capacity, power, jurisdiction) to “drive out” (ekballein, or expel, release, throw out, exorcise) demons. This ministry was critical in a day when people worshiped the emperor, the various gods of pagan culture, and the deities of the mystery cults. In so doing they invited demonic spirits into their lives, enemies that were to be confronted by Jesus’ servants.

And so the “apostles” were chosen for three purposes: that they “might be with him,” that they might “preach,” and that they might “drive out demons.” Note the order and priority—we must be with Jesus before we can speak for him or serve in his authority. Only when we receive his message can we transmit it. We cannot give what we do not have. Our culture is disinterested in sermons from us, but hungry for a genuine word from God.

Now Mark lists the apostles: “These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder)” (3:16-17). Mark is the only Gospel writer to include this statement about James and John. Some connect his characterization to this event:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village (Luke 9:51-56).

Others connect the title to their power as preachers. Whatever its purpose, Jesus made clear that their “thunder” was dependent on his authority. So it is with us today. When last did you seek the Lord’s teaching before preparing yours? When last did you ask him to empower your words before you spoke them and as you taught your class?

When we follow Jesus’ call in his power, he uses us to transform souls and advance his Kingdom. Is there a greater privilege?

Seek to serve all (10:35-45)
James and John would follow Jesus into the home of the synagogue ruler (Mark 5:35-37) and witness their Lord’s healing power. They would accompany him on the Mount of Transfiguration as well (Mark 9:2-8). Then came an episode that would reveal a dark side to their motivation in following and serving Jesus.
**Status we all seek**

The text begins: “Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask’” (Mark 10:35). They “came” (prosporeuontai, meaning approached) to Jesus, asking him to do whatever they “ask” (aitesomen, or demand). Notice that they did not state the nature of their request before asking Jesus to meet it, indicating that they knew he would not agree otherwise.

Our Lord was too wise to submit to such a request: “‘What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked” (10:36). He asked them to state what they wanted him to “do” (poieso, or make, produce, bring about, perform) before agreeing to do so. We must make our requests according to God’s will if we would have his provision: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (1 John 5:14).

Here was their request: “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (Mark 10:37). “Let us . . . sit” (dos . . . kathisomen, meaning give or grant that we be appointed) to the right and left of Christ in his “glory” (doxe, meaning splendor, greatness, fame). Jesus and his disciples were near Jerusalem (10:32), where they assumed he would become the military conqueror the nation expected their Messiah to be. When that happened, they wanted to be given the places of greatest prominence among his followers.

This episode is in Mark’s Gospel because it applies to each of us. We are all tempted to “be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was right: the “will to power” is the basic drive in fallen human nature. James and John were not the last to follow Jesus as a means to their own advancement.

**A station we should seek**

Jesus had earlier explained his definition of discipleship:

> Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:34-37).

Clearly, James and John had not understood or accepted Jesus’ call to sacrificial service: “You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (10:38). “Drink” translates piein, meaning soak up, experience; “baptism” (baptisma) refers to washing and, metaphorically, to suffering. In
the Hebrew Bible, the “cup” is often a symbol of divine wrath (see Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15-17); “baptism” can refer to death (Romans 6:1-7). By identifying so closely with Jesus, they would face what he faced and suffer what he suffered.

Their response indicated their lack of understanding: “‘We can,’ they answered. Jesus said to them, ‘You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with’” (Mark 10:39). James would be the first of the apostles to suffer for Jesus, and John the last. The older brother was killed by Herod, as we have noted; the younger was exiled on Patmos before dying of old age in Ephesus.

While James and John would share Jesus’ sufferings, they would not be the only ones to serve Christ faithfully: “but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared” (10:40). It was not for Jesus to “grant” (dounai, meaning give, bestow, appoint) such positions of recognition, for they belong to those for whom “they have been prepared” (hetoimastai, or kept or made ready). Jesus would say nothing further about the subject of his disciples’ heavenly reward, because he knew that such motivation would contradict his desire that they choose to be servants.

Lest we think that James and John were alone in their ambition, note that “when the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John” (10:41). Why were they “indignant” (aganaktein, or angry, frustrated) with them? If they shared Jesus’ concern for the disciples’ motives, they would not have reacted in this way. It is more likely that they wanted the same positions the two brothers had sought and were angry that the brothers had taken such initiative ahead of the others.

Our Lord knew this to be a critical and teachable moment for his followers: “Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them’” (10:42). He “called them together” (proskalesamenos, or summoned them) and warned them about those who are “regarded” (dokountes, meaning recognized, believed to be) as rulers of the “Gentiles” (ethnon, meaning nations, heathen). They “lord it over them” (katakyrieuousin, meaning become masters, gain dominion over, subdue, overpower) and “exercise authority” (katexousiazousin, or reign) over them. As subjects of the Roman Empire, these men would know the pain of submission to such human authorities.

It is human nature to seek such prestige and status for ourselves, but we must resist this temptation: “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (10:43). “Not so” (ouch houtos, or not in this manner, not in this way) with Jesus’ followers—they must choose to be a “servant” (diakonos) to be “great” (megas, or important). This is a decision each of us can make, or Jesus would not expect it of us.
Note that to “be your servant” was a decision related to position, not value. It’s been said that biblical humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. It is seeing ourselves as God sees us—fallen but loved, sinful but redeemed, flawed but useful. Jesus never demeaned himself, but he sought constantly to glorify his Father. So it should be with his followers.

In fact, “whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (10:44). Verses 43 and 44 are an example of Jewish parallelism, where the second line relates to the first. In this case, verse 44 explains and amplifies verse 43. Whoever wishes to be “first” (protos, or prominent) in God’s Kingdom must be “slave” (doulos) of “all.” Not just of those who are clearly superior to us in some way, but those whom the world would consider inferior. Not just when they deserve our service, but when they do not.

As with the decision to be a diakonos in verse 44, the commitment to be a doulos in verse 45 is not an indication of inherent worth. Slaves in the Roman Empire were some of the best-educated and most significant people in society. In their number were doctors, philosophers, teachers and scholars. To be a “slave of all” is to choose service in all times, all circumstances, for all people.

This seems a difficult choice to make, as most of us feel such service to be beneath our status and dignity. But consider the decision made by the perfect, sinless Son of God: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 19:16), but he did not come to be served. Rather, he came to serve and to “give” (dounai, or donate, bestow) his life as a “ransom” (lytron, or price of release) for “many” (pollon, meaning a great number).

There is an interesting juxtaposition of ideas here. We were once “slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:17), but Jesus has paid our lytron, purchasing us from the one who had enslaved us and thus setting us free. Now Jesus calls us to be doulos again, but to the King: “You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (Rom. 6:18).

Now we are called to serve our Father and his children—not so he will love us but because he already does; not to earn his favor, but because we have already received his mercy; not to become people of significance, but because his grace has already made us so.

**Conclusion**
Not long after Jesus pronounced himself a servant and a ransom, he fulfilled his calling in Gethsemane and at Calvary. We next find James and John with our Lord in the Garden,
where he asked them to “stay here and keep watch” (Mark 14:34). Tragically, he found
them sleeping when they should have been interceding (14:37, 40). And so our Lord
prayed alone, suffered alone, and died for those who would abandon and deny him.

It is still so today. The hymn writer would have us sing, “Jesus paid it all; all to Him I
owe,”¹ because it is true. Jesus called us from our boats and nets to follow him; he has
equipped and empowered us to advance his Kingdom in his Spirit; and he has enlisted us
as servants of the Father and his children. We owe Jesus our obedience to his call, out of
gratitude for his grace.

In serving others, we serve our Lord (Matt. 25:40). In loving them, we love our King. We
prove our commitment to Christ by our commitment to those for whom he died.

Leo Tolstoy tells of a cobbler, a godly man who made shoes in the old days. One night
the cobbler dreamed that the next day Jesus would come to visit him. The dream seemed
so real that he got up very early the next morning and hurried to the woods, where he
gathered green boughs to decorate his shop for the arrival of his Guest.

The cobbler waited all morning, but to his disappointment his shop remained quiet,
except for an elderly man who limped up to the door asking to come inside for a few
minutes of warmth. While the man was resting, the cobbler noticed that his shoes were
worn out. He gave a new pair from his shelves to the man, who wore them gratefully out
the door.

Through the afternoon the cobbler waited, but his only visitor was an elderly woman. He
had seen her struggling under a heavy load of firewood and invited her into his shop to
rest. He learned that she had eaten nothing for two days, and saw to it that she had a meal
before she went on her way.

As night began to fall, the cobbler heard a child crying at his door, lost and afraid. He
welcomed the child inside, soothed the tears and led the way home. When he returned,
the cobbler was sad, convinced that while he was away he had missed the visit of his
Lord. In his anguish he cried out, asking why the Lord had delayed his visit.

Then he heard a soft voice say:

Lift up your heart, for I have kept my word.
Three times I came to your friendly door.
Three times my shadow was on your floor.
I was the man with the bruised feet;
I was the woman you gave to eat,
I was the child on the homeless street.²

Jesus will visit you today as well. Will you serve him when he comes?
Mark 1:19-20; 3:13-17; 10:35-45. James and John: We Are First

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1 “Jesus Paid It All,” words by Elvina M. Hall, 1865.
2 The basic story and the lines of poetry are from the poem, “How the Great Guest Came,” by Edwin Markham, which is based on Tolstoy’s story, “Where Love Is, God Is.” See http://www.ccel.org/ccel/tolstoy/23_tales.iv.iv.html and Calvin Miller, ed., The Book of Jesus (New York: Simon and Schuster for Barnes and Noble Books, 1998), 177-179, available to view online by searching for it at google.com/books:
http://books.google.com/books?id=t8XnofD9cQC&pg=PA177&lpg=PA177&dq=Edwin+Markham+cobbler&source=bl&ots=bgfCVKtp8&sig=1hsVWWJzNzSxoOgSSD2DT0ZbywM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=3Pm0UKDfK4Hm2AWD7oHYBA&ved=0CFYQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=Edwin%20Markham%20cobbler&f=false. Both accessed 11/27/12.